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Gasparcolor between Art and Fascism

Noemi Daugaard

The history of technology is inseparable from human history as a whole: nothing evolves from a vacuum. On the contrary, the societal, historical, and cultural context of any technology is of fundamental importance, as the following case study of Gasparcolor will demonstrate.

By the early 1930s, the German film industry had been looking for a technologically advanced mimetic color film process for a while, but numerous experiments to achieve consistent results for the mass market had failed. At the same time, the American company Technicolor had already started its conquest of the international film industry with its newest process, Technicolor No. IV, introduced in 1932. Furthermore, after the Nazi regime took power in 1933, color film technology became a political issue, since from early on, in the eyes of propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels film was of major importance as a medium of mass propaganda.

From Photography to Cinematography

Gasparcolor is a subtractive two or three-color process consisting of a multilayer print film with a cyan layer on one side, and two layers respectively dyed magenta and yellow on the other side. The color appearance on the Gasparcolor film print is achieved through a silver dye-bleach process, based on the controlled destruction of dyes in relation to the amount of silver.

First suggested in relation to color photography in the writings of Ralph Eduard Liesegang in 1889, the principle of the silver dye-bleach process was elaborated upon by Karl Schinzel in 1905, for his still photography process Katachromie, and by Danish inventor Jens Herman Christensen in 1918. Despite that, the principle was never put into practice. Consequently, it was only through the work of Hungarian chemist Béla Gaspar, who patented Gasparcolor in Germany in 1932, that a viable silver dye-bleach process was proposed for color cinematography.

Due to its technological specificities, a Gasparcolor film print is easily recognizable. Most importantly, the process is characterized

by pure, brilliant, and intense colors, while the perforation area is black and the sound track colored. Moreover, Gasparcolor prints often display small pools of color, and common imperfections and signs of use such as scratches, tears, and splices, which typically result from intensive projection and careless handling, will reveal the different color layers in the print. Amongst the advantages of the process—in addition to the beautiful colors—are its high stability, its resistance to color fading, and the creative potential it offers. This potential was certainly one of the main reasons why Gasparcolor rapidly began to be used by avant-garde filmmakers, mostly in the field of animation, where the process was very successful.[1]

→ Fig. 1

Avant-Garde—Animation—Advertising

Indeed, Gasparcolor and its brilliant colors soon attracted the attention of filmmakers such as Oskar Fischinger, Len Lye, or Alexandre Alexeieff, who were all producing short experimental films, often for advertisements. On the one hand, these animation films can be understood in the tradition of color music. As a matter of fact, toward the end of the nineteenth century, composers such as Alexander Skrjabin increasingly devoted themselves to the combination of color and music that had been theorized since antiquity. This musical representation of colors in turn influenced the artistic avant-gardes of the early twentieth century in their cross-modal representations of color, light, and music in painting and film. Thus, in different ways, many of the Gasparcolor animation films pick up on the color music theories, filmic experiments, and color organs which were so prominent throughout the 1910s and 1920s. On the other hand, the avant-garde approach to animation and advertising films in Gasparcolor illustrates important developments in the realm of advertising, as well as avant-gardist ideals concerning the role and purpose of art.

→ Figs. 1+2

In fact, the emergence of the film industry paralleled the exponential growth of consumer culture in Western society. Concurrently, films were quickly employed in advertising, especially when advertising experts and psychologists started to underline the advantages of using colored film for marketing purposes.[2] In this context, short colored animation films became of central interest for many avant-garde filmmakers, as these films were not only a sure source of income but were also widely distributed and provided them with a platform for creative experimentation.[3]

Furthermore, the colored advertising films also complied with important avant-garde purposes. When Walter Gropius founded the State Bauhaus in Weimar in 1919, he created a school that unified craftsmanship and fine art in the service of functionality. This conceptual framework would shape the notion of art for a long time. Influenced and accompanied by constructivist theories, the Bauhaus also promoted the ideal of aestheticizing everyday life, calling upon artists to "leave the bourgeois and isolated sphere of so called 'autonomous art' and enter design and advertising, newspapers and media in order to reach a broader public."[4] In this sense, the Gasparcolor commercials of the 1930s are an embodiment of several fundamental cultural aspects of their time.

Politics, Antisemitism, and Agfa

The many successes of Gasparcolor in the realm of animation soon led to the creation of an English subsidiary in London, managed by Adrian Klein (later Adrian Cornwell-Clyne), who shot one of the few Gasparcolor live-action documentaries, COLOUR ON THE THAMES (GBR 1936).

→ Fig. 3

After 1933, however, the climate in Germany changed, not only in politics but also in the art and entertainment sector. The Nazi party's anti-Semitic propaganda demanded a "cleansing" of the film industry, inciting the public against Jewish filmmakers, actors, and producers. Similarly, the artistic avant-garde movement found itself under attack. Labeled "Entartete Kunst," degenerate art, modernist or avant-garde art was declared to be un-German, Jewish, or Marxist. In 1936, all modernist art was prohibited, and in 1937 the exhibition *Entartete Kunst* in Munich showed 650 examples of confiscated art before the artworks were hidden, sold, or destroyed.

Yet, the film avant-garde's relationship to the regime was more ambivalent. While, officially, avant-gardist aesthetics were rejected, the Gasparcolor commercials were all produced and screened only after 1933, and some of Oskar Fischinger's films were even sent to the Venice Film Festival in 1934. Márton Orosz underlines that, in the midst of the political turmoil, advertising film became somewhat of a niche, allowing the avant-garde to exert its creative freedom and resulting in a transnational, pan-European network of exchange and development, strengthened by the avant-garde ideal of creating a universal language of form.[5]

→ Fig. 4

Nonetheless, when the political climate became too dangerous, Fischinger and many other artists and filmmakers left the country, as did Béla Gaspar. As a matter of fact, Gaspar's origins were becoming a problem as well. His being Hungarian, and allegedly of Jewish descent, was used in order to discredit the inventor and his technology's reputation.

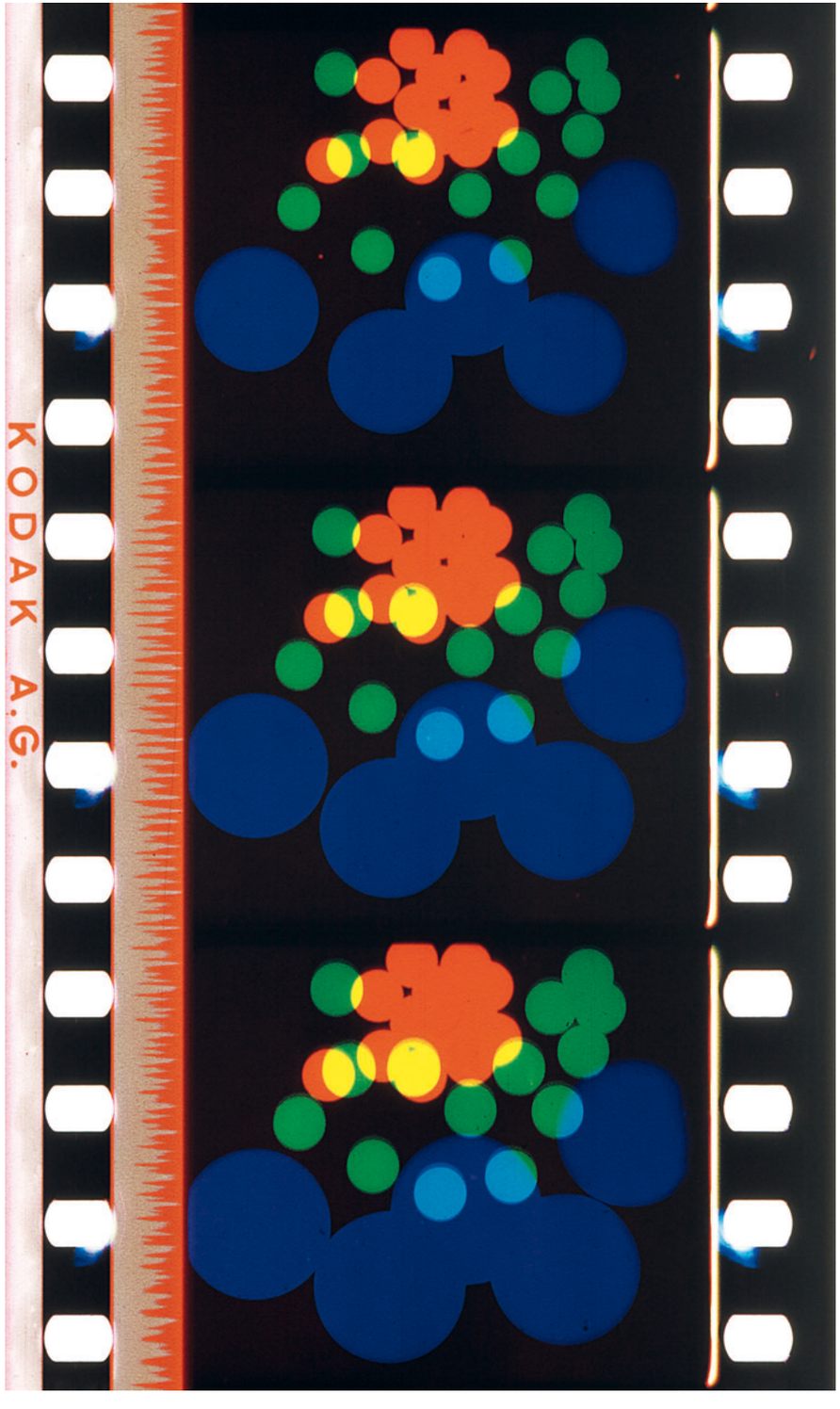
To make things worse, the regime-linked Agfa, which was part of IG Farben, the largest German chemical conglomerate and producer of film and photography supplies, heavily interfered with Gasparcolor's success from the moment it was first patented. Invigorated by the regime's quest for an independent German color film technology which could demonstrate the technological prowess of the German Reich, its autonomy, and its progressiveness, Agfa was aiming at inventing their own color film process. As a consequence, they objected to every Gasparcolor patent, initiating a patent dispute lasting almost ten years, and eventually went as far as planning to utilize Gaspar's patents without permission. In fact, an excerpt from a 1935 protocol reads: "The first larger-scale tests at Ufa to produce a color picture with the Gasparcolor process will be realized in any case, with or without Gasparcolor's consent."[6]

Ilfochrome and Cibachrome: Back to Photography

With the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the implementation of Agfa's monopack color process Agfacolor Neu, and the cessation of the avant-garde production of advertising films, Gasparcolor began to disappear. The ongoing menacing climate, the never-ending patent dispute, and the competition's attempts to discredit Gasparcolor finally led both Gasparcolor Ltd. in England and the Gasparcolor companies in Germany to quit production by the early 1940s. Béla Gaspar settled in the US, where he unsuccessfully attempted to commercialize his inventions and continued his research until his death. Nevertheless, the silver dye-bleach process for photography, known as Cibachrome or Ilfochrome, persevered: variants of the process were sold until 2012, when the last batch of materials was produced.

Thus, despite its technological finesse and aesthetic appeal, the color film process Gasparcolor was brought down by the social turmoil, economic instability, and fascist upheavals that involved it in a political tug-of-war.

1. See Barbara Flueckiger's text in this volume, "Film Colors: Materiality, Technology, Aesthetics," 17–49.
2. See Sema Colpan and Lydia Nsiah, "More Than Product Advertising: Animation, Gasparcolor and Sorela's Corporate Design," in *Films that Sell: Moving Pictures and Advertising*, ed. Bo Florin, Nico de Klerk, and Patrick Vonderau, London: British Film Institute, 2016, 114–30, here: 121–22.
3. See Noemi Daugaard, Sebastian Köthe, and Olivia Kristina Stutz, "For Her, for Him: Advertising in the Silent Era," in *Le giornate del cinema muto 37*, Pordenone: Associazone culturale "Le giornate del cinema muto," 2018, 183–86.
4. Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919–1939*, Amsterdam: University Press, 2012, 64.
5. See Márton Orosz, "'The Hidden Network of the Avant-Garde': Der farbige Werbefilm als eine zentraleuropäische Erfindung?," in *Regarding the Popular: Modernism, the Avant-Garde and High and Low Culture*, ed. Sascha Bru et al., Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011, 338–60.
6. "Auszug aus dem Protokoll über die Besprechung in Berlin am 18.12.1935," Bundesarchiv Deutschland, R 8128, 1723 [translated].



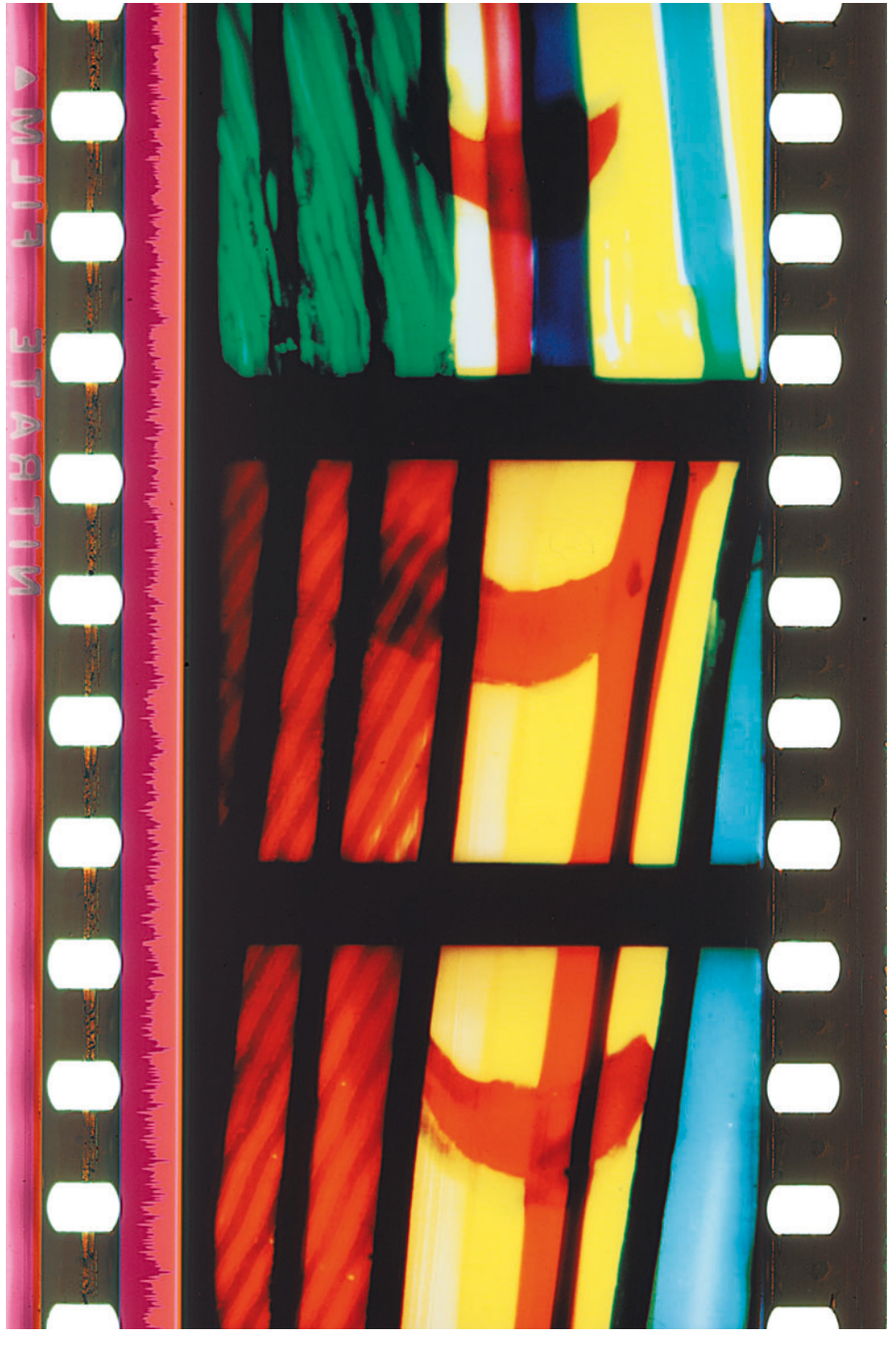


Fig. 1 KREISE (Oskar Fischinger, GER 1933–34). Oskar Fischinger's personal Gasparcolor nitrate print, 35 mm. Credit: Library of Congress, Fischinger Trust, Center for Visual Music. Photo: Barbara Flueckiger

Fig. 2 COLOUR FLIGHT (Len Lye, GBR 1937). Gasparcolor, nitrate film, 35 mm. Credit: The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Barbara Flueckiger

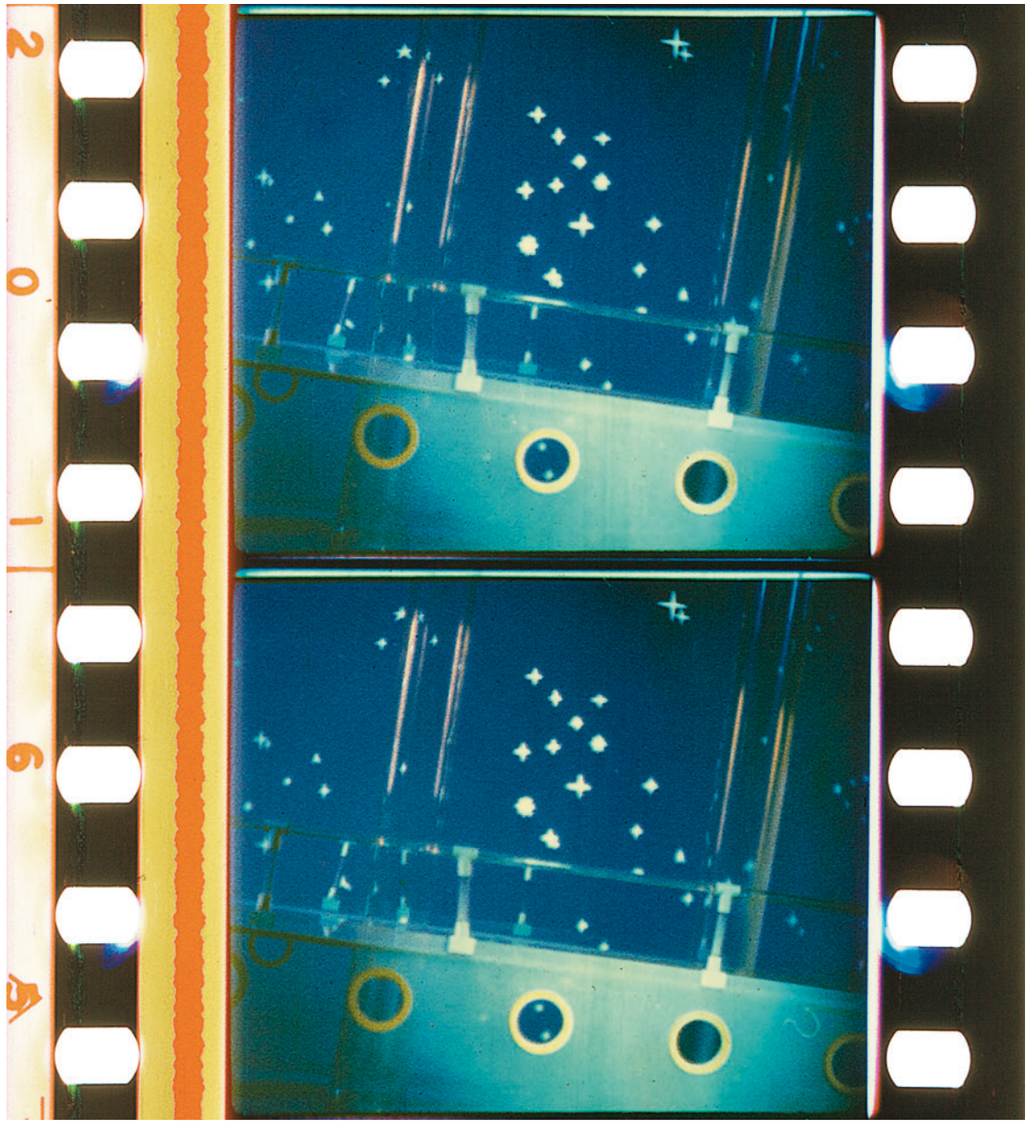


Fig. 3 COLOUR ON THE THAMES (Adrian Cornwell-Clyne, GBR 1936). Gasparcolor, nitrate film, 35 mm. Credit: BFI National Archive. Photo: Barbara Flueckiger

Fig. 4 THE SHIP OF THE ETHER (George Pal, NDL 1934). Gasparcolor, nitrate film, 35 mm. Credit: BFI National Archive. Photo: Barbara Flueckiger